

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

MULL AND SPEYSIDE

12-22 JUNE 2018

Guide: Sally Nowell

Guests: Diana Forder, Roger Forder, Margaret Moore, Muriel Smith, Margaret Murphy, Sheila Turner

Day 1 The beginning of our Speyside and Mull holiday!! Everyone arrives in the Highlands and settles into The Steading before our first meal together cooked by our wonderful chef Sharon. After dinner, we meet together for a discussion about our week and then everyone heads off to bed after their long day of travel.

Day 2 We begin our day with a stroll from The Steading down to and along the River Feshie. Our first bird is a Tree Pipit perching in the old Alders that grow in the floodplain of the river. It displays beautifully rising and dropping in song as we continue our walk.

We spot the resident Osprey pair further along the river bank, the female on the nest and the male perched by the river. Watching at a distance, they seem unperturbed by our presence. It is really difficult to get a view of the nest through the trees, just one small window through the trees gives us a peek. The water levels in the river are very low with so little rain for several weeks so not many birds on the river but there are plenty of plants on the sandy banks and some stunning Tufted Vetch sprawled across the otherwise bare sandy soil. As we enter the woods a little further on, we hear sounds up above us, we stop and listen and eventually spot a hole deducing that the sound is that of a Great-Spotted Woodpecker family. We back off a little and watch the hole intently waiting for an adult bird to return with food, they do but not to the hole we are watching! There is a second hole towards the back of the tree and as we stand we see the adult woodpecker return with food a couple of times and when they do we manage a quick glimpse of the youngsters as they greedily grab whatever their parents have found.

After our walk along the river, we return to The Steading for coffee and then we drive to Grantown-on-Spey, where we have lunch on the Old Spey Bridge whilst enjoying the view up and along the river. We are looking for Dipper and Grey Wagtail here but we haven't been on the bridge long when Roger spots a Common Sandpiper family. We watch them for a while hopping along the rocks and then have views of a young Dipper.

The Sandpiper is joined by a family of Grey Wagtails that seem to be following each other along the bank north of the bridge, wherever the Sandpiper went the Wagtails followed.

Our next stop is Abernethy Forest. Margaret and Mary decide to stay at the van for a siesta and the rest of us take a walk into the stunning forest where we are serenaded by Tree Pipits and have lovely views of a Treecreeper family. We walk to a stream across the track, nearly empty enough for us to walk across but decide to head back and make a quick dash to Dorback on the off chance of some late afternoon Black Grouse that might save us an early start later in the week. Not surprisingly, we have no luck with the Grouse at this time of day but we do get some great views of Red Squirrel on the feeders along the Dorback road. After dinner, we head to the Dusk Watch hide and not long after arriving we are lucky to have a beautiful adult Pine Marten on the rocks outside the hide. We are hoping for a glimpse of the young Pine Marten that have been visiting but no luck though we do see four Badgers who arrive just as we are about to head back to The Steading, so a thoroughly satisfying evening of mammal watching.

Day 3

The weather forecast is for Hurricane Hector to descend upon us so we fear the worst! It feels like we need to batten down the hatches for the night so we are all quite relieved when we wake to some much more gentle weather and just a sprinkling of rain but it is pretty chilly and we wonder if the worst is yet to come! We adjust our schedule to accommodate the weather and decide we need to try and make sure we do everything we can before the weather stops us from doing anything at all. We start off at Avielochan, knowing that everyone is keen to see Slavonian Grebe. Initially, there is no sign of the birds but suddenly Diana spots them along the edge of the loch under the bird hide. We watch two birds feeding along the edge and then, moving into a patch of Amphibious Bistort, they feed in this area for some time and every now and again we are treated to the sight of a chick on one of the adults backs, it pokes out its head just enough that we can see the stripy head and then it disappears again into the safety and warmth of its parents feathers. We also spot a lone Goldeneye chick in amongst the yellow Water Lilies. There is no sign of its siblings or parents but these gorgeous black and white chicks can survive on their own from a very early stage.

We leave Avielochan and head up to the Glenmore visitor centre for another look for Red Squirrels and a quick hot chocolate. We head on up to the Cairngorm funicular car park hoping to be lucky and catch sight of Ring Ouzel. As we park the van we see a female hopping about on the grass a short distance away. She is then joined by a handsome male. Roger takes some photos of both birds whilst resting the camera on Diana's head. Apparently, she is just the right height to be an alternative to a tripod!

After lunch, we are still lucky with the weather, so head up one of the Glenmore tracks in the hope of catching up with some of our Pinewood specialists. We walk silently and expectantly along the track with all eyes checking the old granny pines along the valley in the hope of catching a glimpse of a roosting Capercaillie. No luck but we do find some interesting dust baths and Capercaillie feathers, so always good to know they are there and that we are breathing the same air as them. Further on, we have several Crossbill fly over but rather uncooperatively they keep perching nearby but just out of sight, so we cannot get a full ID on them. After the Crossbills, we stumble into Crested Tit, flitting about in the trees. It is really difficult to get good views but they are present long enough for all of us to see them. The weather improves as the day goes on and we are lucky not to have to wear our waterproofs for long.

Day 4

The dreaded early start!! 5 am at the van and off we go in search of Black Grouse. We have a beautiful journey down the A9 towards Blair Atholl and when we arrive at our destination we are thrilled to see six male Black Grouse lekking very actively on the field above us. We watch them for quite a while as they strut their stuff and then take a break and start feeding for a few minutes before starting lekking again. After we leave the Grouse on this beautiful road we spot a pair of Bullfinches feeding together on the road ahead of us on what looks like Elm seeds. We continue on to Trinafour seeing Brown Hares in the fields as we drive up and over the high and wild road back to the A9. On the stunning drive, we stop at a small lochan to see a family of Teal and lower down families of Stonechats escorted us downhill. We head back to The Steading for breakfast at 9am and then on to the Moray coast. First stop is Chanonry point, the tide is just right and there seem to be Dolphins everywhere! They are leaping clear of the water over by Fort George and in the sea just in front of us. We estimate seeing around 15 dolphins of the population now thought to be over 200. As we leave we drive through the golf course amidst flocks of Linnets, and Yellowhammers. At Udale Bay, we shatter a birding couple's peace in the hide arriving en masse to see flocks of Oystercatchers, Curlew, Red-breasted Merganser, Eider chicks in nurseries with two females in charge, Green Shanks and a lone Scaup. Outside the hide, Diana finds a stunning Yellow Hammer feeding and Mary drew our attention to the Skylark singing above us in the sun. A brief stop at Cromarty and then back to The Steading via Craigellachie and a very brief view of a Pied Flycatcher for Roger on the way home. Sadly, there are no Wood Warblers singing today, so we head off to prepare for the next stage of the trip.

Day 5

Today we head off at 9am en route for wonderful Mull. Getting all the luggage into the van is remarkably easy after Sally's initial anxieties and so we have a relaxed, though rather grey, journey across via Fort William, down the side of beautiful Loch Linnhe (where we are midged over coffee!) and ultimately to Oban. The heavens open here putting pay to our plans for

a brief wander around Oban. Margaret and Sally navigate their way to a quiet road where we stop by a tiny harbour to eat our lunch. A group of Ravens croak overhead, and the weather starts to clear. We head off a little early to the ferry and arrive in enough time to squeeze on to the earlier ferry. Our van is the last vehicle and we are all amazed that we fit into the tiny space they have left but with the guidance of the ferry staff we get in with just a few inches to spare. This gives us a head start in our Mull adventures so after checking in at our hotel, we set out to explore. The weather brightens up considerably, so we find a breezy spot where we can avoid the midges and check out the beaches for birds and Otters. A few moulting male Eider Ducks and a mixture of Gulls but no Otters. We do though, get our first very distant view of a White-tailed Eagle across the bay over the hills and then we see three - and then one starts to head straight for us! It just keeps on heading towards us and then comes into contact with two Buzzards and a Hooded Crow. The aerial display is amazing with the Eagle sometimes flying upside down to avoid the Buzzards. We watch as they battle and then catch a glimpse of another White-tailed Eagle before they disappear from view. We are in such a beautiful spot, warm and midge free, we are happy to stay and though the Eagles do not reappear, we see good views of Dunlin and Ringed Plover on the beach and then head back for a splendid meal at our hotel.

Day 6

Margaret and Mary decide to spend their day relaxing at the hotel and take a bus ride to Tobermory. The rest of us head off on an adventure! We initially aim for the point just beyond the pretty village of Salen. The morning is a bit damp and still but the midges are taking a while to find us, thankfully. Our first spot from here is of a Black Guillemot out to sea and then we see a diver further out, our first Red-throated Diver of the trip! Sheila is delighted, she loves Divers and we enjoy prolonged but somewhat distant views before we decide we need to head on. A brief stop at the Salen Loos is much more exciting than we anticipated when we spot four Great Northern Divers together, quite close to the shore. This is a great surprise and once again, Sheila who asked at the beginning of the trip whether we would see them, is thrilled. Of the four only one is in summer adult plumage so we surmise that the other three may be juveniles from the previous year, too early for full-grown youngsters. Reluctantly, we leave as they obligingly hang about in the cove. En route to the Ulva ferry dock, we take a slow drive looking for Eagles and Otters and arrive in good time to have coffee before we get on the ferry bound for Staffa and Lunga. The weather is mixed but we manage to get seats up top and en route have distant views of Manx Shearwater and then a fabulous view of a Storm Petrel dashing by, all of us at once thinking it is a House Martin! A beautiful little bird, so delicate against the power of the sea.

On magnificent Staffa, we have a lunch spot just above a group of Shags and we pass by some angry Oystercatchers with chicks that lay motionless by the path side. We also pick up our first Rock Pipits before we are whisked off on our boat to Lunga. A slightly different challenge meets us here as the unusually low tide means getting up the beach is a little more challenging than usual! But the short scramble over the rocks is well worth it when we arrive at the top of the cliffs and are met with the jaw-dropping sight of what seems like hundreds of Puffins!!

After an hour or so on Lunga, we set sail again and, for those of us who braved the outside deck, have a rather wet but thrilling return journey.

Day 7

We set off this morning on 'the northern circuit'. This takes us from our hotel towards Salen, stopping en route for an 'Otter scan' or two. No luck, but at our first stop after Salen we are surprised to find a White-fronted Goose amongst the Greylags who is sadly being spurned by his cousins and looks a little like 'billy no mates'! Diana spots a rather handsome Red-breasted Merganser before we eventually head off across to Dervaig. Our stops on the way are for some super wildflowers including some stunning stands of Melancholy Thistle, Water Aven and Yellow Flag Iris and nearby, a rather uncooperative Wheatear, as most of them are today, never perching for quite long enough to get the whole bus on them and then a Raven adult feeding two juveniles with what looks like a Common Gull chick. We stop for coffee a little further on and get some reasonable, though distant views of a ringtail Hen Harrier. We head on through mixed weather, some heavy bursts of rain are swiftly followed by clearer skies and so when we arrive at our lunch destination, the stunning Calgary Bay, we are fortunate it is dry enough to take a stroll along the beach, though the wind is pretty chilly so lunch is taken in the van. We decide to explore a bit and take a narrow road doubling back towards Dervaig, not far along the road Margaret Moore spots a Wheatear. On we drive and are thrilled to see a male Hen Harrier ahead of us but sadly we don't all see him before the wind takes him away from us and over the brow of a hill. We head on optimistic he might show again and follow the narrow road down a steep decline before spotting a number of parked cars in what seems to be the middle of nowhere. After a bit of detective work, we deduce because we then see a sign, that they are going to view an Eagle nest. We manage to spot the nest from the road and though the views are distant can clearly see two White-tailed Eagle chicks on the nest stretching their wings.

We enjoy views of these for a while and head back over to the Ulva ferry road for a few more Otter scans en route. On one occasion, we have fabulous views of a Great Northern Diver but we are clearly upsetting a Common Sandpiper so presume we are near a nest and decide we need to vacate the area, but not before some very splendid views of this stunning bird.

Onward we go and a final stop yields a very surprising and at first hard to identify Slavonian Grebe in transitional plumage and a flypast from a Whimbrel.

Day 8

We are aiming for Iona this morning. The weather looks ok but we are expecting rain in the afternoon so want to get there as soon as possible. En route Sally spots a male Hen Harrier flying high above the hills and we manage brief stops to enjoy stunning Stonechats on the fences as we drive. The journey too, is a little longer than we expect and we just get to the ferry in time with no minutes to spare! Everyone is organized however so we hop on the 10.30 ferry and off we sail accompanied by a myriad of dog passengers much to Mary's delight!

As soon as we arrive we start towards the beach, stopping en route to admire Northern Marsh Orchids which are sadly in the path of an enthusiastic trimmer so look like they do not have long for this world!! The Corncrakes calling in the background sadly do not appear, so close and yet so far! We walk past some interesting newly designed houses and over to the beach where we find a couple of small pieces of Iona marble and watch some Ringed Plovers and Eider Ducks enjoying the surf. We return for lunch in the atmospheric ruins of the nunnery and we all go off to do our own thing for an hour or so; some visit the Abbey whilst others walk along the road to absorb the peaceful atmosphere of Iona. Margaret and Sally come across a shepherdess moving her sheep from one pasture to another, something she apparently does every day. A little window shopping in the lovely local shops and we are back on the ferry for 3pm. We agree to stop for tea at 4 pm and choose the hamlet and bay of Pennyghale for this. No sooner have we arrived than we catch a glimpse of an Otter. Roger picks it up again and then we have views of it cavorting in the sea whilst feeding. A non-breeding Black-throated Diver also makes an appearance. Off to Loch Spelve and another Otter, spotted by Sheila, keeps us occupied as the rain finally arrives, a passing Greenshank arrives flushed by a ringtail Hen Harrier and a couple of Redshanks fly in too. It is time to return to the hotel after a great day. An otterly amazing day!

Day 8

We start off heading down to Lochbuie, a stunning drive through glorious old oak woodland and then along the gentle loch shores. Common sandpipers fly back and fore across the road and a stunning lapwing stands by guarding her chicks but getting us a close view of a beautiful bird. At Lochbuie, we see Gannets coming in close to the shore and further on in the bay, a group of diving Gannets. We backtrack and then head out to Croggan and have a close encounter with a herd of cattle on the road as we go. A coffee stop at the end of this beautiful road and on our return, a fabulous White-tailed Eagle flies low over the loch towards us and then quickly disappears in a single flap of its massive wings. We move on for lunch to Loch Spelve but are distracted by Eagles en route; two birds landed

on the ground feeding. We watch the two White-tailed Eagles feeding for quite some time, it is an amazing opportunity to see these birds on the ground looking warily into the sky, presumably worried that something might come and steal their meal. We reluctantly move on and stop for our delayed lunch at Loch Spelve but have no sooner stopped than we see a dog Otter asleep on a seaweed covered rock, he dozed un-phased by our attention and even a passing ringtail Hen Harrier does not distract us from this fabulous view of a beautiful animal. Eventually, we move on passing through stunning scenery along the side of Loch Na Keal. Wheatears run the gauntlet as we drive and we eventually stop to be spellbound, yet again, by a mega relaxed Otter lying full length in the late afternoon sunshine on the seaweed. After enjoying our second amazing Otter view we make tracks for the hotel with a couple of final stops to squeeze as much out of our last few hours on Mull as possible.

Day 9

After breakfast, we check out of the hotel and make our way to try, once again, for Golden Eagle. We know we have plenty of time to journey back to Speyside and think we'd like to spend as much time as we can on Mull. We drive down to Loch Buie, stopping hopefully and optimistically to look for Golden Eagle. We are in luck!! One flies over giving us our grand finale with a tiny Merlin dwarfed by the eagle, in pursuit. Everyone manages to enjoy this magnificent bird before we move on to the ferry over to the mainland, this time a different route taking us on to the mainland via Lochaline. We encounter another spectacular drive over wild and deserted roads with stunning views to Ben Nevis across Loch Linnhe, over on the Corran Ferry and back to the reality of traffic and busy Fort William. We arrive back at The Steading in the late afternoon in time to prepare for homeward journeys. After our final meal together, we go through the bird list and reflect on our ten days together.

Day 10

After breakfast we all prepare for leaving, saying our good-byes before jumping in cars or onto trains. The Mull Speyside holiday has offered fabulous wildlife watching over ten days in some of the most spectacular parts of Scotland.

Favourite Species

Diana	Finding Slavonian Grebe at Avielochan
Roger	Slavonian Grebe brought back memories from the past and the great views of the iconic White-tailed Eagle.
Mary	The Otter and seeing and recognizing Redstart and Stonechat
Margaret Moore	The sleeping Otter and the good view of a Redstart which she has been wanting to see for a long time.
Margaret	The Great Northern Diver which is so graceful and gives such great views to everyone.
Sheila	The Male Hen Harrier
Sally	Finally getting a fabulous view of Golden Eagle on the last day and the Great Northern Diver.

Favourite Place

Roger	The atmosphere of the ancient forest on the Glenmore Track.
Diana	The road where we see the Redstart on Mull and the fabulous knarled oak trees.
Mary	Chanonry point and the back road from Cromarty to Rosemarkie
Margaret Moore	Driving along Loch Linnhe en route back to The Steading.
Margaret	The drive around Loch Buie
Sheila	The trip to Staffa and Lunga
Sally	The drive around the south side of Loch Na Keal

Magic Moment

Roger	Getting back to the Lunga Ferry with bones intact but climbing up the cliff on Lunga and seeing all the puffins and thought "Hells Teeth!"
Diana	The view on the way back from Mull from the spot where we watch the Stonechat and can see through to Ben Nevis.
Mary	Also loves this spot and seeing the Woodpecker feeding young beside the River Feshie.
Margaret Moore	Seeing the dolphins breaching at Chanonry Point.
Margaret	The Slavonian Grebe with the baby on its back at Avielochan.
Sheila	Easy - the Black Grouse lek
Sally	After being on Mull for just an hour spotting the first White-tailed Eagle flying towards us and it getting closer and closer and then giving us great views.

BIRDS

Mute Swan
Greylag Goose
Greenland White-fronted Goose
Canada Goose
Shelduck
Mallard
Teal
Tufted Duck
Eider
Scaup
Goldeneye
Red-breasted Merganser
Red Grouse
Black Grouse
Red-legged Partridge
Corncrake (Hear)
Pheasant
Red-throated Diver
Black-throated Diver
Great Northern Diver
Little Grebe
Slavonian Grebe
Fulmar
Manx Shearwater
Storm Petrel
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Grey Heron
White-tailed Eagle
Osprey
Golden Eagle
Red Kite
Hen Harrier
Common Buzzard
Sparrowhawk
Kestrel
Merlin
Oystercatcher
Ringed Plover
Lapwing
Dunlin
Common Sandpiper
Redshank
Greenshank
Curlew
Great Skua
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Common Tern
Arctic Tern
Puffin
Black Guillemot
Guillemot
Razorbill
Rock Dove
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Cuckoo
Swift
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Skylark
Swallow
Sand Martin
House Martin
Tree Pipit
Meadow Pipit
Rock Pipit
Grey Wagtail
Pied Wagtail
Dipper
Dunnock
Robin
Redstart
Stonechat
Wheatear
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Blackbird
Ring Ouzel
Blackcap
Whitethroat
Willow Warbler
Wren

Pied Flycatcher
Spot Flycatcher
Great Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Crested Tit
Long-tailed Tit
Treetreeper
Jay
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Linnet
Redpoll
Goldfinch
Greenfinch
Siskin
Bullfinch
Crossbill Sp
Yellowhammer

Total Birds: 113

MAMMALS

Pipistrelle Bat
Badger
Otter
Pine Marten
Grey Seal
Common Seal
Bottlenose Dolphin
Roe Deer
Red Deer
Red Squirrel
Brown Hare
Rabbit

PLANTS

Lesser Butterfly Orchid
Small White Orchid
Fragrant Orchid
Northern Marsh Orchid
Heath Spot Orchid
Amphibious Bistort
Yellow Water Lily
White Water Lily
Tufted Vetch
Cow Wheat
Chickweed Wintergreen
Foxglove
Flag Iris
Marsh Valerian
Bluebell
Thrift
Cinquefoil
Tormentil
Ragged Robin
Melancholy Thistle
Water Avens
Yellow Rattle
Ladies Smock
Hawkweed
Sea Bindweed
Red Campion
Birdsfoot Trefoil

INSECTS

Chimney Sweeper Moth
Green Veined White
Cinnabar Moth

Total Species: 155